

WILLINGEN AND THE SHIFT IN MISSION

by

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The factors which have transformed modern missions of the ecumenical variety, though they began before Willingen (1953), were there first clearly seen. Let us observe them.

The meeting was held eight years after the end of the most destructive war ever to be waged and in Germany which had been devastated. Communism had risen in the postwar years to an apogee of power. China had been captured, missions banished, and the Churches suppressed. Korea was being crucified and no one knew what nation would suffer next. The atomic balance of terror was new enough to be terrifying. European empires had collapsed and every year brought news of some wealthy and populous possession "throwing off the yoke of Eurican control" and becoming an independent, sovereign nation. Some Hindus were saying that Christians in India would soon be like the Jews in Germany. Islam and Buddhism were manifesting a new aggressiveness. Max Warren in his great address well voiced the mood.

Here at Willingen clouds and thick darkness surround the city and we know *with complete certainty* [italics mine DM] that the most testing days of the Christian mission in our generation lie just ahead (Goodall, *Missions Under The Cross*, 1953:40).

Missionary leaders of the conquering countries and of conquered Germany assembled together in this "cloud and thick darkness" to ask what is

the mission of the Church. Theologically, i.e. before God, what should the Church be doing? Leaders of the Churches in the newly independent nations were demanding that they be considered peers of the Euricans. 'Mission' had to be theologically defined in relation to 'Church' so that Afericasian Churches which had been subordinate to missions and hence to Eurican Churches, could be recognized as equals.

The new theology of mission had several tasks. First, it had to enable classical gospel-propagating mission to be carried out in the face of the collapse of European empires. Second, it had to recognize Afericasian denominations as equal to Eurican. Third, it had to affirm that mission was not exclusively from Christian Eurica to pagan Afericasia, but rather was from Christians east and west to non-Christian west and east.

Furthermore, the ecumenical movement was drawing Churches closer together. Some leaders of younger Churches in each land were pressing for a merger of weak, younger Churches, each subordinate to its founding mission, into one body able to meet the sending boards as a peer and a strong, continuing Church. Should the International Missionary Council become the Division of World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches? Would this make the World Council missionary? Or rather divert the resources of the missions to various churchly tasks? Was there any way of harmonizing the mission of the Church which was concerned with evangelizing the world and discipling the nations, with other duties and responsibilities of the Church? Were the missionary societies only the evangelistic committees of the Churches?*

* *Missions Under the Cross* by Norman Goodall, the Willingen addresses and reports, is a splendid document. It makes one proud to be a part of the missionary movement. It portrays the wide, ranging nature of classical mission - which unfortunately we cannot spare time to enjoy, as we focus attention on the theology of mission.

With all these questions in the air, it became obvious that answers should be based, not on personal predilection or the accidents of history, but on biblical and theological grounds. Needed was a theology of missions. Men said that "the most distinctive theological insights of our time, could contribute to the reformulation of a theology of mission" (p. 11). Others held that theology itself must be reformulated in the light of the missionary enterprise - the presentation of the Gospel to hundreds of millions of men of other religions and no religion.

Willengen assembled under the International Missionary Council. It appeared to be talking throughout, in all its addresses and discussions, of classical mission. The 'mission' which delegates had in mind was that of proclaiming Christ throughout the world by word and deed and persuading men to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church. A person who did not know of the massive swing away from classical mission in the last fifteen years, were he to read *Missions Under the Cross*, would conclude that the missionary enterprises it was speaking about had the same goal they had been aiming at during the preceding hundred and fifty years.

But when read in the light of the events of the last fifteen years, it is clear that at Willingen the swing away from classical mission had begun. Let us note some of these beginnings. 'Mission' begins there to be interpreted not merely as 'worldwide evangelistic obedience' but as "bringing all things into captivity to Him" (p. 192). Christians are summoned "to come forth from the securities which are no more secure, and from boundaries of accepted duty too narrow for the Lord of all the earth."

Reinhold Von Thadden, who had suffered much under totalitarianism, said, The Church...exists for the world.... A Church under the Cross should be the loyal protector who ventures into the danger points of the world's affairs, who does not shrink from touching hot iron (p. 62).

Lesslie Newbigin said, "Our hope is nothing else than that in Christ all things in heaven and earth should be reconciled, summed up" (p. 111). Other speakers stressed again and again that God is King and Lord. His will prevails in *all things*. The sovereignty of God was advanced in those dark times as the sure foundation of the missionary enterprise - and the missionary enterprise began to be interpreted in many ways. The mission was God's, not man's - and included all God wanted done! It could not fail. Even when it appeared to fail - as in the cross itself - God was at work turning defeat into glorious victory. The title of the book, *Missions Under the Cross*, reflects the gloom, confidence, and theology of that conference.

On the broad foundation just mentioned - that *all things* in heaven and earth will be summed up in Christ - many other structures than discipling the nations could be built. At Willingen, the beginnings of these buildings can be discerned. Willingen could not know that those who would control the Division of World Mission and Evangelism in the sixties would carry these beginnings very much farther - so far in fact that the building dedicated to "bringing nations to faith and obedience" would be completely overshadowed.

When the mission of the Church is interpreted as "bringing all things in captivity to Him," the door is opened wide to maintain that God is working through the revolutionary processes of our day and the mission of the Church is precisely to assist this revolution, rather than to bring men, who have faith in Jesus Christ, through baptism into His Church. When Christians are summoned 'to come forth from the boundaries of accepted duty too narrow for the Lord of all the earth,' the door is opened to regard baptizing penitent sinners as a narrow duty and picketing liquor stores (for example) as more acceptable to Him. When, in talking about the *mission* of the Church, we emphasize that 'the Church is *for* the world,' it is only natural, in days of

great poverty and population explosion, to maintain that 'missions should be concerned with increasing rice production in India and distributing the pill in Latin America rather than selfishly with increasing their own membership.'

Few Christians object to worthy activities. The Church as Church has many God-given duties. The Church (i.e. the Household of God in any community and in any nation) should truly be interested in promoting righteousness, good health, education, physical comfort, kindness, neighborliness, brotherhood, and in general, humane living both in itself and in others. The Bible tells us to do good to all men, especially to those of the Household of God. The Church correctly labors for an outlawing of the drug traffic, the liquor traffic, child labor, slavery, oppression of the poor, race prejudice, and every other social evil.

Two other things are also true. One, that the Church should proclaim that all human achievements are tainted with sin and that the best arrangements of men are poor approximations of God's will. The message of the Church should, therefore, *always* be that the bread which perishes is of less value than the Bread from Heaven. The Church should not despise the flesh, but it should never deceive men by substituting it for the Spirit. Two, the task of discipling the two billion is so vast, so urgent, so near, and so possible that it must always form a substantial part of the Church's activity. The surest way to consign discipling to oblivion is to mix it in together with all the other duties of the Church. When that happens, local duties, reinforced by secular agencies, the innate selfishness of the human heart, and the special pleadings of vested church interests, divert efforts and funds from church planting around the world to alleviating evil conditions in the neighborhood and nation.

Exactly this has happened during the last fifteen years. With the

new definitions of mission, the institutional Church, facing the problems of Eurica, has insisted that renewal, not worldwide evangelism, is the crucial task. The Church-in-mission also has come to mean the Church serving only human needs most vividly before us - 'the agenda of the world,' as it is commonly called. Since vividness sprouts out of headlines and television screens, the mission of the Church is jockeyed into a position where it assigns first place to physical, educational and cultural needs. The need of men to know the Saviour, never the subject of headlines in papers or tumults on television, is steadily overlooked. In many denominations announcing the Saviour to the two billion, would fade entirely were it not for the momentum of the missionary societies. Even these, however, to the degree that they were taken over by the new definition of mission, became less and less interested in multiplying indigenous churches in the unchurched populations of Africa.

In 1977 a great battle in the theology of mission rages at this point. There are two sides. On the first are ranged those who maintain that any true theology of mission will avoid "a narrow, partisan interest" in the growth of the Church. God is interested in the world first, not the Church. The Church is purely instrumental. The Kingdom of God, His rule of righteousness, is the goal. God does not want men to say, "Lord, Lord." He wants men, of whatever religion or none, who *do* righteousness and *love* mercy. On the second side are ranged those who maintain that belief in Jesus Christ, being baptized in His name and living as responsible members of His Church are matters of obedience. They are not open to question. We are commanded to do them. We cannot substitute what looks good to us. Furthermore, ^hwhile justice, mercy and a humane life are, without question, pleasing to God, the best way to achieve these is through the indefinite multiplication of cells of the redeemed

(Christian churches) throughout the body politic. Each side constructs a theology of mission to defend its position.

The Uppsala document on mission aligns itself with the first side. Its alignment, clear in the provisional document, is partially clouded in "Section One" of the final document. (Uppsala heavily revised the provisional Section One - the theological justification of mission - in the direction of church planting evangelism) "Section Two" of the final document, however, single-eyedly urges that the Church-in-mission concern itself with philanthropy and social action. It refuses to say that men who do not believe in Christ and become His disciples are in danger. It does not even plead that discipling the nations be *temporarily* laid aside, while, during the seventies, involvement with the world at its doors becomes the chief characteristic of mission. It consistently emphasizes what the Church can do by assisting the flesh. It is singularly silent on what the Lord of the earth can do by way of redeeming sinful men in Christ. It betrays the two billion and stresses improving the lot of those who are already Christian.

The beginnings discerned at Willingen have matured and are making a strong bid to be recognized as all the mission there is. The men who advocate these new varieties of mission, have now abandoned Willingen's clear view of missions as propagating the Gospel throughout the earth and are hostile to church planting evangelism, calling it 'deficient in justice,' and 'selfishly concerned with the Church, while God is concerned with the world.' A letter on Evangelism sent out by the Division of World Mission and Evangelism (October - December 1969) voices a conviction (which it calls a suspicion) that "the dissemination of religion and membership growth are not the most trustworthy evidences of an authentic proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

Will the shift be carried out? Many leaders of the traditional missionary societies, possibly without seeing the issues, are following the Geneva line. It is 'in' to be talking about the relevant Church and being involved in life - and who can object to these good ends? Many leaders do not see the logical outcome of this emphasis on involvement is to diminish or even terminate proclaiming Christ and persuading men to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church. In many a seminary, students think they are being contemporary when they aid the revolution and engage in social action as a *substitute* for becoming a lifetime, overseas missionary. They fail to see that *both* need to be done.

Churchmen of all sorts - ministers and missionaries - need to read the documents on mission from Willingen through Uppsala, to see for themselves where the battle is and what the real issues are. Then they should act so that vigorous spread of the Gospel, evangelization of the world, discipling of the nations, and as much constructive change in the social fabric of each *ethnic unit* of mankind as is possible be brought about.

Part of the crisis in missions today is that many foreign missionary societies which began as associations of men utterly committed to the task of discipling the nations, have become, in effect, the "mission committees" of their denominations. They are now bound to regard "discipling the nations" as merely one of the many important tasks their Churches are doing.

Mission executives, furthermore, who by virtue of their travel among the congregations, and intimate knowledge of them, are elected as national leaders of their Synods or Conventions, become powerful clerics, and in consequence speak, *not* for the foreign missionary society, but for *the whole Church*, not for the conversion of the non-Christian world; but for everything the Church should be doing. They think about all the departments and committees

of their entire denominations as engaged in "the mission of God." Winning the world to Christ is often left without a voice. "Mission" leaders are talking about other good activities.

To some extent, theology guides action and Christians frame theologies of mission to help them see which of many good activities God wants them to emphasize. But to a greater extent, Christians (on the basis of their religious experiences and the leading of the Holy Spirit) decide what they should do and then construct theologies to buttress their positions. We may confidently expect that many theologies of mission today (and particularly those which emanate from New York and Geneva) will be the sort which denominational heads should construct, not those which missionary society heads should.

Heads of missionary societies today are tempted to think of themselves as above "merely propagating the Christian religion." Some professional theologians of mission, have succumbed to this temptation and go out of their way to belittle and stigmatize church planting. The mission of the Church, they hold, is much broader and more Christian than that! Their theology of mission is a theology of "everything God wants done," not one of proclaiming Christ and reconciling men to God in Him.

Fortunately the heart of the Church and of most missionary societies and leaders of missions is still sound. Though the avant garde has control of the publications, most Christians are not with them, even though they yet support them. Since the shift is being proposed in old, familiar words, the change of direction has not yet been seen. Even after it is seen, it will not be believed. But when it is both seen and believed, support will be withdrawn. Discipling of the nations, reconciling men to God in Jesus Christ, bringing the nations to faith and obedience, is so ineradicably part of the

Christian faith that in the long run, the shift cannot succeed.

This is no cause for complacency, however, for in these very days, in this last third of the twentieth century, great sections of mankind have turned responsive to the Gospel. It will be tragic if those whom God has prepared to march out of Egypt, fail to leave the land of bondage because an influential segment of the leadership of the Church believes that it is better to liberate the slaves in Egypt and let them worship Isis and Osiris, than to take them to the Promised Land and lead them to worship God.

Christians should see the shift now and understand the doubletalk which is abroad. They must recognize, for example, that 'industrial evangelism' is the new phraseology for inducing labor and management to talk together about better working conditions. It has nothing to do with bringing men to put their faith in Jesus Christ as God and Saviour. The secular world is stressing 'truth in lending' and 'truth in packaging.' It would be well for the Church to make sure that there is similar 'truth in missions.' We have nothing against reinterpretation to fit new conditions. We do a good deal of it ourselves. But all reinterpretation should frankly acknowledge that it is such and should seek support from those who believe in the new interpretation. New interpretations should not be parasites on hosts dedicated to different ends.

Christians should therefore support vigorously those missionary societies and those missionaries who intend world evangelization, espouse a theology which requires world evangelization, and constantly measure their methods to ascertain the degree to which they are achieving their end.